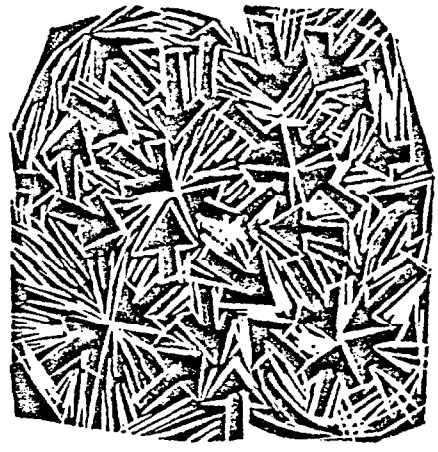
Point of View

By ERWIN CHARGAFF



Vanishing into Dust

Retirement need not interrupt the research of a historian or philologist, but for a scientist it brings the end of space, help, and money—with explosive suddenness

AS HAS BEEN SO SPIRITUALLY STATED by one of its Presidents, the business of America is business. Given a relatively stable currency, and in the absence of severe economic upheavals, a nation consisting of, and made for, merchants, did not find it difficult, conceptionally or practically, to include a provision for old age among the profits accumulated in the business of the day. A large proportion owned homesteads to which they could retire.

The rapid industrialization created a tremendous demand for cheap labor, which was satisfied by the importation and the immigration of the exploitable, and heavily exploited, poor of Europe. Those succeeded, after bloody and heart-rending struggles, to get organized into unions that, at any rate at the beginning presumably honest, eventually set up pension funds of varying efficacy. These, together with the nationwide Social Security system, guaranteed to many workers some degree of stability. The retirement incomes of federal, state, and city employees have also reached some form of sufficiency, if a pension rate around 60 per cent of the working income is assumed as the minimum.

The great exception to this at least tolerable, if not satisfactory, state is represented by the employees of private enterprises, of which the private universities and colleges form an important, although chronically insolvent, part. The low esteem in which education is held by the people has baffled me from the very time I first came here. The schoolmarm in the little red schoolhouse may look good as staffage in political speeches, but nobody cares much about how she lives or, rather, starves.

When I first began to think about these matters, I came to the conclusion that the degree of civilization of a country can be gauged from three things: how the people behave toward their children, their old, and their teachers. America fails in all three respects; the Turks, for instance, appear to represent a much higher level, despite inferior plumbing and less competence in automobile repair.

Most private universities belong to a pension scheme that is administered by the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association—an institution whose workings everybody who finds his way through Kafka's castle will understand readily. Each month, a certain proportion of the professor's salary is deducted, and the university contributes the same share or even twice as much toward the eventual pension. (This being a free-for-all country, there is a great deal of elegant variation among the ways in which different universities handle the arrangement.)

ONCE A YEAR, the professor receives a piece of paper on which various mysterious and highly tentative figures are inscribed, intimating a far from rosy future. He is only 48 or 50, and the future seems far away. But suddenly, in a flash, he is 65 or 68 or 70, whatever the mandatory retirement age is; and the time has come for him to sit in the shade of a tree and enjoy the golden years. The plating is actually very thin, and probably not even gold, but there are many other things that he discovers at the same time. He finds, for instance, that the retirement pay dangled before him by the uninformative colored slips of the year corresponded to an entirely unrealistic option that, for reasons of family and obligations, he cannot accept, and that the pension he will receive will be much smaller than he thought. He also discovers, or his sharp scientific mind knew it before, that in the meantime the dollar has fallen to less than one-fifth of the value it had when he contributed the bulk of his contributions; and he may come to the paradoxical conclusion that the longer he has paid in, the less he will get.

Moreover, because university salaries were in most cases incredibly low until the late 1950's, older colleagues, who retired ten years before I did, found—and if God spared them, still find—themselves with a pittance. This must be compared with the situation in most of Europe, where today the retirement pay ranges between 80 and 100 per cent.

In any event, few university professors will find it easy to save enough money to supplement their outrageously small pensions. A professor of Chinese, with perhaps one-fourth of the salary of a fourth-rate pathologist, will hardly be able to "provide for himself"; nor will he, during the first and hardest years of retirement, be able to receive his Social Security benefits if he attempts to add to his pension by part-time work.

Nevertheless I believe that retirement is a necessary social institution, which, however, should not be applied in the present haphazard manner. What is very regrettable is the absence of satisfactory financial provisions for retirement.

The problems, of course, are not only monetary. If we limit ourselves to university people, professors or researchers, great differences can be seen in the way retirement affects an experimental scientist and a historian or a philologist. Provided the latter is permitted to keep his office or is able to continue his work at home, there need not be an abrupt break in the continuity of his research efforts. How different is the case of a laboratory scientist—a physicist, a chemist, a geneticist or, to take the discipline that I know most about, a biochemist. Unless we happen to come upon the rare, humble, and happy man who is forever content with his simple colorimeter, Kjeldahl apparatus, or phase microscope, there is a costly, bulky, heavy, and complex array of machines and contraptions, all prone to go out of service at the shortest of notices and requiring an entire staff of assistants that are both—the machines and the assistants—not easily kept in good humor. Much space is needed, much help, and much money. All three are abolished or severely curtailed, and with explosive suddenness, at the time of retirement.

There is more to it. As he grows old, the scientist in his familiar laboratory feels more alone than is realized. A wall of ice has grown between him and the younger people who are around. Their language is no longer his, but it is the only language he hears. Their standards are different, but they are those by which he, too, will be judged. The editors of the scientific journals and their referees are the graduate students of *his* graduate students; and so are the so-called peers who sit in judgment on his research proposals. Change or, as the optimists may call it, progress has overtaken the old scientist.

What still holds him upright—the young voices, the old rooms, the daily trip to laboratory and office, the letters he gets, the journals he reads, the view from his window—all this has formed a framework of habit and repeat, a skeleton on which he has put the flesh of his own long years, of his sorrows and his joys; and then, suddenly and cruelly, all this collapses. From one day to the next he is told to clear out, flutter away, do as if nothing had happened, fade. And so he is gone.

THIS HAS BEEN, more or less with a minimum of poetic freedom, my own story. I got into this situation, as happened always in my life, without any doing on my part or, rather, because I had not done anything. Originally, I had hoped to retire from the university in 1970, when I was 65, and to move to Europe. Life in New York had become unpleasant, and the outrageous Vietnam war made symbolic separation advisable. Some nebulous interest in having me had even been expressed in several places: Bordeaux, Montpellier, Lausanne, Naples. But the collapse of the value of the dollar, the inflation, and the concomitant shrinkage of my savings and of the pension I could expect rendered such a move impossible. And so, an old practitioner of the Taoist principle *wu wei* (do nothing), I stayed.

As I had been told repeatedly that I was to move out as soon as my current research grant was terminated, I no longer accepted graduate students during the last active years, since I did not want to involve young people in the decline and fall. Although retirement itself has some ludicrous features, I was dismayed to find that my pension amounted to less than 30 per cent of my last regular salary.

As to the rites of passage that lead to becoming an emeritus professor, they have obviously been designed by someone who fell in love with the old films depicting the degradation of Captain Dreyfus. It is true that the muffled drums are barely audible, no epaulets are ripped off, no sabers broken. But the spirit, and especially the hypocrisy, are the same. The sudden transition also brings with it something else: one day you are in the middle of almost too much activity, and there is a lot of noise; the next day it gets so still that you can hear the dollar drop.

I had a very well-equipped laboratory, a large scientific library, and a considerable quantity of papers and correspondence, as is bound to accumulate in more than 40 years. And, besides, research cannot be turned off like a tap; there was quite a bit of scientific activity still going on and a heap of half-written and unwritten articles. I sent my papers to the library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia; I gave most of my books to the library of Columbia Medical School. All the rest I had to transfer in an incredible hurry to a hospital in another part of New York where there was some space.

On Nov. 20, 1975, the movers came. Certain things had to be left behind because they required individual attention, especially a cupboard full of my own old preparations. When we returned, we could not get into the laboratories. We were told that all locks had been changed at somebody's order.

Were I given to metaphorical writing, I should say that what happened, and especially the way in which it happened, has broken my heart. If I refrain from saying so, it is because the sardonic delight in seeing events occur exactly as I had predicted them outweighed all else. I have always had a sense of the fittingness of things. And since at Columbia one left hand never knows what the other does, it was quite fitting that less than six months after they had changed the locks on me at the medical school, the university gave me an honorary doctorate.

While the movers were busy I stayed at home and browsed around. My eyes fell on a page of Heraclitus, and there he said: "The way up and the way down is one and the same." I concluded that Heraclitus was wrong.

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